

Rural myth and reality

The death of Ted Moulton highlights mounting pressures in an occupation normally seen as existing in an air of rural tranquility

Although it is not yet known why Ted Moulton, the Derbyshire farmer, radio personality and actor took his life this week, his death highlights the growing stress faced by farmers and increasingly leading to suicide.

The speed of the agricultural decline in this country has been so great that statistics have yet to catch up. Dr Anthony Russell is director of the Arthur Rank Centre, the Royal Agricultural Society's Socio-Economic Unit, and he has been watching with increasing alarm how pressure has taken its toll.

"There is a growing awareness in farming that stress, often leading to suicide, is becoming a major problem", he said. "The decline in the industry has taken only three or four years — even quicker for livestock farmers. The lower commodity prices and the sharp decline in the value of land has hit farmers very severely: some figures show an annual drop of as much as a third which suggests that in some rural areas it has been a good deal more than that."

Oddly, farming is officially way down the list for occupations in which suicide is a hazard, after doctors, publishers and journalists, but according to Dr Russell it has not always been so: "Farming headed the suicide list in the 1930s and it seems that whenever there is a decline and farming is in a bad way, occupational stress quickly ensues."

Dr Peter Sainsbury, a psychiatrist and formerly of Graylingwell Hospital, Chichester, and a colleague, Dr Brian Barraclough, carried out a survey in the 1960s and 1970s which attempted to identify people most at risk. A prominent group was the garrulous, apparently happy-go-lucky, late-middle-aged males, sometimes with health problems. "The tragedy about Ted Moulton is that on the face of it he is exactly the type most easily treated. I could almost guarantee to have cured him in a month," said Dr Sainsbury.

"The occupational mortality figures show that farming is rather the opposite of stress-



Ted Moulton on his farm: pressures of a troubled occupation

ful, quite a convivial occupation, in which suicide does not feature greatly. But that is obviously a superficial view."

This is made clearer by figures from the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys: The league table for suicides from all causes is headed by hairdressers, followed by deck hands, general labourers, domestic staff and general managers. But when the figures are sorted into job-related categories a different picture emerges. This list is headed by people of independent means followed by doctors and dentists, farmers and farm workers, pharmacists and therapists and judges and lawyers.

The stereotype of rustic conviviality, according to Dr Russell, has given way to depression for many farmers — "and it is a very lonely form of stress," he said. "Farmers necessarily work in isolation rather than in a team as with other occupations and there is very little that you can do to diversify if the business is in decline. It is also a factor that in farming family life is very much tied up with working life: you can't escape by going home."

According to Dr Mark Williams of the Medical Research Council's Applied Psychology Unit at Cambridge: "Depression is not enough in itself, nor even chronic stress over long periods. The crucial element is loss of hope — depression compounded by

hopelessness is very dangerous."

It is also true that farmers, compared with most occupations, have lethal opportunities. "A window of depression can pass", said Dr Williams. "It is when a window of depression meets a window of opportunity that tragedy is near. If the opportunity is allowed to pass it may never be sought again."

"It was interesting that in the 'sixties when non-lethal North Sea gas replaced coal gas for domestic use, the suicide and para-suicide rate dropped. "But people who work on the land have the means at hand by which to take their own lives. Shotguns are usually available. Chemicals like Paraquat and other toxins are, too."

Sadly for the farming community, there is often nobody at hand to deflect the crucial depression when it strikes a farmer. According to Dr Russell we need to do two things: learn from the same problems overseas and bring pressure to bear in this country.

"We need to make the bankers and accountants see what the problem is and why it has grown so quickly, and we should be looking at the American situation where banks themselves are folding and farmers are dropping like flies."

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